

The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ
February 2, 2021

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin
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Hebrews 2:14–18; Psalm 84:1–6; Luke 2:22–40

by the Rev. James Ross Smith

I woke up early on Monday morning and looked out the window. It was snowing, and I knew it. I recognized the snow for what it was. I did not grow up in the Arctic, but I did grow up in Western New York, and I knew exactly what kind of snow this was—small, sharp flakes, blown by a heavy wind, coming from the east, on a diagonal. I knew what it would feel like if I went outside and tried to walk to Fifth Avenue. I could remember how that snow felt on my face, as I walked home from school on a cold February day. I also knew that if I had gone outside yesterday, I might have had to change my mind. Experience tests knowledge. Maybe those snowflakes would be as wickedly sharp as I'd predicted, but maybe they wouldn't.

All that is one way of knowing, and it's an important one. Consider all those heroic women and men who've been working on the COVID-19 vaccines in recent months: we depend on them to imagine, postulate,

think, experiment, test, and prove their hypotheses by knowing and learning in just this way.

The scientific path to knowledge is a very good thing, but it's not the only path. Faith, belief, trust, and love usually work differently.

One of my teachers in seminary, a Benedictine monk named Aidan Kavanagh, used to say that the first thing any catechist should do when preparing an adult candidate for baptism is to lean over, point to a blade of grass, and say, "You had nothing whatsoever to do with creating blade of grass. *Nothing* at all."

That fundamental fact messes with our narcissism. Baptism is not just about *us*. It teaches us that we are not the sun in a solar system of our own creation. It brings us into relationship with God, with the world, and with each other.

Grass comes up a lot in the Bible. In Scripture, grass has a lot of different meanings. It is a humble thing, eaten by oxen (Ps 106:20). It is a symbol of everything that is mortal and fleeting. Things pass away like mown grass (Psalm 37:2), like grass burned up and discarded without a second thought (Matthew 6:30). But it is, because of its basic, humble ubiquity, also a sign of vitality and life. You don't have to live in an ivory

palace to know what dew clinging lightly to the grass looks feels like (Deuteronomy 32:2). A tiny simple thing, but really beautiful.

And sometimes in the Bible the sight of everyday green grass is something that inches us towards those grace-filled moments, when, like Jacob, we say to ourselves, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it.”

From Psalm 147:

“Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; *
make music to our God upon the harp.
He covers the heavens with clouds *
and prepares rain for the earth;
He makes grass to grow upon the mountains *
and green plants to serve mankind” (147:7–8)

In this song, the beauty of the world brings the psalmist to God and inspires him to sing the Lord’s praises.

William Blake also sings of such an experience:

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in
a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
/ And Eternity in an hour” (“Auguries of Innocence”).

Walt Whitman writes, “A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; / How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he. / I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven. / Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, / A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt, / Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*” (“Song of Myself, 6”).

To some people this is a strange way of knowing, filled as it is with paradox and questions like “*Whose?*”. It seems so resistant to the scientific method. Still, it is an ancient way of knowing, and it endures.

In today’s gospel, Simeon, a righteous and devout man, a seeker and, apparently, a patient man—he refuses to give up on hope, consolation, or God—is led by the Spirit to the Temple one day, and, suddenly, hope and persistence lead to *revelation*. The sight of something—*someone*—small and easily dismissed, an infant child of simple parents—his kingship very well disguised—opens a kind of door to transcendence for Simeon—and it is a Jacob moment, “The Lord is in this place and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16).

For Luke, this revelation has more than one meaning. It tells us right away, here in chapter 2 of his gospel,

what the shape of his two-volume work will be: Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah and prophet, who brings salvation first to the Jewish people and then, beginning in Jerusalem, to the nations, to the world, and to Rome itself.

Simeon's words also have an Easter meaning: just because you experience revelation, transcendence, and glory, does not guarantee immunity from suffering. Jesus' path will not be an easy one. He is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel. He will be resisted, and his mother, too, will know great pain.

But, still, there is revelation, and there is glory. And this glory, Luke Johnson tells us, "...connotes the presence and splendor of God," not Israel's 'reputation'"¹

That is what we celebrate and proclaim today: the infant Jesus in the Temple is a small thing, easily dismissed, but like an atom, a seed, a blade of grass, his small body is filled with explosive power, the very life of God. Simeon believes it. Somehow, he *knows* it. Luke proclaims it and invites us to believe it, too, and to go forth from this place to live that belief: Christ, a light of revelation, the light of the world, God's light, not overcome by darkness.

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy, *Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina 3 (Liturgical Press, 1991, footnote 32, page 55.

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